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What program works with bullying in school setting? Personal, social, and clinical implications of traditional and innovative intervention programs

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Abstract

Bullying and cyberbullying (the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate behavior to harm others) are usually considered as the most prevalent types of school violence. In the literature, aggression is often conceptualized as emerging, being maintained, and modified by child's personality characteristics and the interactions between these and the social contexts (e.g., peers, family). The available research has certainly helped to improve the anti-bullying intervention programs and to predict models of victimization and perpetration, nevertheless there are still several difficulties in the management of specific prevaricating situations, due to the tendency to: (1) do not consider the subjective point of view of children and their definition of aggression, often different from the one proposed by adults (2) underestimate the role of adults and their relationships with the victims in modifying or exacerbating hostilities between peers (3) conceptualize bullying as an individual phenomenon (the characteristics of the bully and the victim) rather than interpersonal and socially constructed. The bullying phenomenon will be discussed departing from the critical analysis of different conceptualizations and introducing a relational perspective deriving from the labelling theory and Interactionism. Operational suggestions and strategies for teachers and families dealing with deviant minors will be presented.

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1. Introduction

Bullying and cyberbullying (the use of information and communication technologies to support deliberate behavior to harm others) usually are considered the most prevalent types of school violence. In the literature, aggression often is conceptualized as emerging from, maintained by, and modified by a child's personality, characteristics, and the interactions between these and social contexts (e.g., peers and family).

The research certainly has helped improve anti-bullying intervention programs as well as predict models of victimization and perpetration; nevertheless, there still are several difficulties managing specific situations due to researchers' tendency to: (1) not consider children's subjective point of view and definition of aggression, which

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often is different from the one proposed by adults; (2) underestimate the role of adults and their relationships with victims in modifying or exacerbating hostilities between peers; and (3) conceptualize bullying as an individual phenomenon (evaluating only the characteristics of the bully and the victim) rather than as interpersonal and socially constructed.

In this article, the bullying phenomenon is discussed apart from the critical analysis of different frameworks and by introducing a relational perspective deriving from the labeling theory and interactionism. Operational suggestions and strategies for teachers and families dealing with deviant minors also are presented.

2. A topic definition

Much of the existing research and intervention models on bullying and prevention of bullying in schools are based on the definition of *bullying* provided by Dan Olweus, a pioneer of the studies on the theme. Referring to the idea that aggression is largely rooted in genetics, he defined bullying as a “negative action (emotional, verbal, and/or physical attack) on the part of one or more students that is repeated over time (Olweus, 1994, p. 1173).”

Bullying occurs against students who are vulnerable and cannot properly defend themselves because of size, strength, or being outnumbered (Sampson, 2002). It implies an imbalance of power that usually occurs without provocation; it also can include intimidation, rumor spreading, theft, tripping, destruction of property, sexual harassment, hazing, and ostracizing because of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, or religion. Bullying can be an aggression that is direct (i.e., face-to-face confrontation) or indirect (via a third party and typically verbal) (Rivers and Smith, 1994). Key concepts of Olweus’s definition are “damage repeatedly” and “on purpose.” In line with these premises, many studies have investigated variables in the beginning, maintenance, and evolution of the phenomenon, focusing on: (a) personality characteristics of bullied children; (b) characteristics of bullies; (c) where bullying occurs; (d) attitudes toward bullies; and (e) disclosure of bullying victimization.

Such studies have contributed strongly to the investigation of the characteristics of the phenomenon and helped identify intervention programs, recommendations, and strategies to prevent bullying in schools. For these reasons, their importance cannot be underestimated; however, they reveal some critical flaws. Although they address different factors responsible for bullying, they share three fundamentally inadequate theoretical presuppositions (Faccio et al., 2013, Romaioli, Faccio, & Salvini, 2008).

(1) First, they do not consider the subjective point of view of children and their definition of aggression, which often is different from the one proposed by adults, as has been pointed out by less-known researchers (Smith, Levan, 1995; Swain, 1998. Genta, Menesini, Fonzi e Costabile, 1996, Caravita S., Di Blasio P., Salmivalli C., 2009).

(2) Second, they underestimate the role of adults and their relationships with the victims in modifying or exacerbating hostilities between peers. The school context, as well as parents and teachers, has a crucial role in giving meaning to the offensive action (Iudici, 2013; Iudici et al., 2013a); they often influence each other and can strongly orient the management or suspension of conflicts, especially when the phenomenon occurs in primary school with young children (Baraldi C., 2010). The school organization, teachers’ style of classroom management, and the school’s approach to relations with and between families play important parts in recognizing and contrasting this form of abuse among students and may have serious implications at the clinical level (Hazler R.J., Miller D.L., Carney J.V., Green S., 2001; Iudici et al, 2013b).

Third, these studies conceptualize bullying as an individual phenomenon (evaluating only the characteristics of the bully and the victim) rather than as interpersonal and socially constructed. Aggressive and passive behavior is generated by a cognitive quality, the persistence of which is ensured by means of predominantly intra-psychic heuristics.

We should not forget that juvenile delinquency, gangs, and abusive relationships frequently are described as a result of interaction between the leader group action, based on the recognition and support of the group and the symbolic context in which the action occurs. The conceptualization of bullying in individualistic terms also appears simplistic and meaningless (Bacchini D., Esposito, G., Affuso G., 2009).

3. An Interactionist reading of “Bullying” phenomenon

The above-mentioned studies refer to the interactionist perspective, according to which man is an intentional actor, able to govern situations and actions on the basis of reasons and purposes, in relation to intersubjective situations within social, legal, cultural, and historical contexts (Blumer, 1936). This theoretical framework is not devoted to the study of the individual and his inner life; it refers to the investigation of the relationships between people who live within precise symbolic horizons. The interactionist perspective, in this sense, may indicate new avenues of research and theoretical reflection: it indicates that the individual is not, in his behavior, the product of preexisting conditions or reasons, but is a subject capable of acting according to rules, defined purposes, and foreordained plans. Such acts depend on the subject’s ability to manipulate situational rules, suffer them, or modify them (Salvini, 1998, Salvini et al., 2012; Faccio 2011, 2012; Faccio, Mininni & Centomo 2011).

In addition, the theoretical matrix of interactionism suggests that the attribution of the role of *bully* may activate processes labeling and oversimplification of reality (Lemert, 1981, Becker, 1973), radicalize the stigma, and freeze the possibilities of change as well as repositioning of the boy and his actions. Therefore, according to this perspective:

- a) So-called *arrogance* is not an intrinsic property of the person, but a property given to him or her by the social community and by social norms;
- b) *Bullying* is the result of the application of labels and sanctions by the offender (real or presumed);
- c) It is necessary to abandon the synchronic search of causes that encourage people to act with plunging behavior in order to study a sequential perspective—the individual goes along a path of small steps, each of which is a condition for the development of a specific new perspective that is the premise for new actions;
- d) The bully is generated within an existential path that can be defined in terms of a “career” in which he learns techniques, rules of conduct, justifications, and mature beliefs, interests, and opinions; and
- e) The study of the school context laws and rules on which criteria actions are transformed into transgressions is of fundamental importance.

4. New management strategies

Considering prevaricating actions as a cultural form means to analyze the ways in which children or adolescents and adults participate in a cultural process and generates communicative modes that assume the form of bullying. Consequently, it becomes central to the investigation of new observation categories and studies such as social assigned roles, adults’ roles in constructing and distributing power, and the role of the education system (Iudici & Faccio, 2013).

4.1. Identifying the informal roles in the classroom

The study of roles is essential because they allow specific narratives and identities of self and other representations. A student cannot tell his teacher whatever he thinks; he may say only what is allowed by his role. Each social role provides specific narratives or attributions with respect to events. For example, it is likely that a child will be treated as a student in a hypothetical appointment with the head teacher, and it is possible to anticipate that he will be considered a member of the group in informal communications with friends at the park (Iudici, de Aloe, 2009). Identifying roles assigned from time to time in various contexts allows an observer to distinguish participants who contribute to and influence the communication process. A problem of primary interest for studies on this theme is the presence and relevance of roles in the “culture of prevaricating action” and the ability to check whether and who interprets the role of a bully, helper bully, victim, and spectator.

4.2 Analyzing the narratives used to make offensive actions

Offensive actions must be studied to understand the whole phenomenon of bullying, as offensive actions represent only the tip of a way of thinking, which is expressed through narratives. Those stories are the best communication found by the boy at that time, especially from the expressive point of view (what that gesture or action communicates) and instrumental point of view (the effects on who performs the action as well as the benefits that the symbolic action contains) (De Leo, 2002). The relationship between bully and action is the same that exists between the actor and the text read. The specificity of an intervention in the school context should, therefore, encourage investigation into how those narratives allow the offensive action; it should not encourage investigation into the individuals as bullies or victims (Smorti A., Ciucci E., Smith PK, Brain PF, 1998).

4.3 Identify the contribution of adults in building prevaricating actions

Based on the literature reviewed, research on bullying and cyberbullying seldom considers adults. Scholars tend to assign them a key role in reacting to bullying or engaging in preventive or reparative interventions, rather than their role in constructing the meaning or perceptions of bullying. Hence the proliferation of programs and manuals that provide useful recommendations for parents and teachers.

Might these tools be effective without understanding the participation of adults in communication with children and adolescents as contributing to the culture of prevarication? (Durlak, Weissberg, et al, 2010; A. Shields, D. Cicchetti, 2001; Castelnuevo et al., 2008; Faccio, Belloni & Castelnuevo, 2012). To act against bullying, or worse against the bully, without evaluating all this, means to relativize the phenomenon and paradoxically exclude from intervention potential generators of an abusive culture.

5. Conclusions

To contrast bullying, it is necessary to pay attention to the narratives that generate it, assuming the perspective of the observer who describes and explains the phenomenon. It is necessary to analyze the construction of meanings that actors attribute to the prevaricating actions and possible narratives that they include, triggered by the relational roles, including both victims and aggressors, forms of communication between peers, forms of communication between children and adults and their interaction, and the role of the school system.

We therefore may affirm that the intervention of the psychologist should not be designed to contrast the so-called bullying, but to manage the complex process of interactions between formal and informal education systems that regulates the social life of the boys, and the boys too, with their expectations of social success in a symbolic universe made available by the dominant culture, but continuously renegotiated within peer and adult relationships.

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